

IN THE CLAIMS:

The text of all pending claims, (including withdrawn claims) is set forth below. Cancelled and not entered claims are indicated with claim number and status only. The claims as listed below show added text with underlining and deleted text with ~~striketrough~~. The status of each claim is indicated with one of (original), (currently amended), (cancelled), (withdrawn), (new), (previously presented), or (not entered).

1. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) An information-distribution method utilized by a system including a group of user terminals and a computer connected to the group of user terminals via a network, the information-distribution method including:
 - a designation-accepting step of accepting from any of the user terminals, being a designator, designation of at least any other among the user terminals by the computer;
 - a storing step of storing, by the computer, a buddy list in which at least one designator-user identifier identifying any user terminal that is a designator in said designation-accepting step is correlated with a designee-user identifier identifying the at least one other user terminal designated in said designation-accepting step;
 - an information-accepting step of accepting, by the computer, from a first user terminal being a distributor among the user terminals, ~~informational~~distribution content to be distributed;
 - a distribution-condition-accepting step of accepting, by the computer, from the distributor-user terminal a distribution condition according to which the distribution content accepted in said information-accepting step is distributed;
 - a distributee-candidate-determining step of determining, by the computer, one or more distributee-candidate terminals to which the distribution content will be distributed, the distributee-candidate terminals being at least one selected, in accordance with the distribution condition, from second user terminals among the designee-user terminals stored, in said storing step, correlatively with the designator-user identifier identifying the distributor-user terminal;
 - a first distribution step of transmitting, by the computer, the distribution content accepted in said information-accepting step to the one or more distributee-candidate terminals;
 - a second distribution step of transmitting the distribution content, by the user terminal having received the distribution content, to some or all of one or more third user terminals that are registered in the buddy list of the distributee-candidate terminals; and
 - a distribution-catenating step of sending the distribution content one after another to the third user terminal that the user terminal that received the distribution content designates by repeating said second distribution step,

wherein said distribution-condition-accepting step includes receiving a stop condition for stopping said distribution-catenating step.

2. (PREVIOUSLY PRESENTED) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 1, wherein said distribution-condition-accepting step includes receiving from the first user terminal selection of the at least one distributee-candidate terminal.

3. (CANCELLED).

4. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The information-distribution method set forth by claim ~~3~~ 1, ~~wherein said stoppage-receiving step includes~~ further comprising:

recording stop-condition candidates that are alternatives for the stop distribution condition; and

accepting a selection of at least one of the stop-condition candidates as the stop distribution condition by the first user terminal.

5. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The information-distribution method set forth by claim ~~3~~ 4, ~~wherein said stoppage-receiving step includes: recording stop-condition candidates that are alternatives for the stop condition; and accepting selection of at least one of the stop-condition candidates; wherein the stop-condition candidates include a maximum count of user-terminals that distribute the distribution content.~~

6. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The information-distribution method set forth by claim ~~3~~ 4, ~~wherein said distribution-condition-accepting step includes: recording stop-condition candidates that are alternatives for the stop condition; and accepting selection of at least one of the stop-condition candidates; wherein the stop-condition candidates include a depth-level restriction indicating path length between the first user terminal and user terminals to which the distribution content is distributed.~~

7. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The information-distribution method set forth by claim ~~3~~ 4, further including:

~~a status-receiving step of receiving, from reporter-user terminals among the user terminals, status reports on the users~~ user terminals; and

~~a status-storing step of storing the statuses received in said status-receiving step~~

statuses of the user terminals as reported correlatively with user identifiers identifying the reporter-user terminals; wherein ~~said distribution-condition-accepting step includes recording stop-condition candidates that are alternatives for the stop condition, and accepting selection of at least one of the stop-condition candidates;~~ the stop-condition candidates therein including include a restriction per the status, recorded in said status-storing step, of users-user terminals distributing the distribution content according to the corresponding status.

8. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The information-distribution method set forth by claim ~~3~~ 4, wherein ~~said distribution-condition-accepting step includes: recording stop-condition candidates that are alternatives for the stop condition; and accepting selection of at least one of the stop-condition candidates;~~ wherein the stop-condition candidates include an expiration date for distributing the distribution content.

9. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 1, wherein: the distribution content contains a request ~~by the~~ of a user operating the first user terminal; and ~~said distribution-condition-accepting step includes accepting the stop~~ distribution condition includes a fulfillment condition that serves as a judgment criterion for judging whether or not the request has been met.

10. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 9, wherein said distribution-condition-accepting step further includes:
storing fulfillment-condition candidates that are alternatives for the fulfillment conditions;
and
accepting selection of at least one of the fulfillment-condition candidates.

11. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 1, wherein: the distribution content contains a request by the user operating the first user terminal; and said distribution-condition-accepting step includes accepting a fulfillment condition that serves as a judgment criterion for judging whether or not the request has been met, and
accepting a response to, if the fulfillment condition has been met, user terminals to which the distribution content has been distributed and/or the first user terminal.

12. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 11, wherein said distribution-condition-accepting step further includes:

storing response candidates that are alternatives for the responses; and
accepting selection of at least one of the response candidates.

13. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 11, wherein said distribution-condition-accepting step further includes: storing response candidates that are alternatives for the responses, and accepting selection of at least one of the response candidates; wherein the response candidates include a response reporting, to user terminals to which the distribution content has been distributed and/or the first user terminal, that the fulfillment condition has been satisfied.

14. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 11, wherein said distribution-condition-accepting step further includes: storing response candidates that are alternatives for the responses, and accepting selection of at least one of the response candidates; wherein the response candidates include a response reporting to the first user terminal user identifiers identifying user terminals that have contributed to satisfying the fulfillment condition.

15. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 11, wherein said distribution-condition-accepting step further includes: storing response candidates that are alternatives for the responses, and accepting selection of at least one of the response candidates; wherein the response candidates include a response reporting, to user terminals to which the distribution content has been distributed and/or the first user terminal, the distribution content the fulfillment condition for which has been satisfied.

16. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 11, further including:

a response-receiving step of receiving a response from a user terminal to which the distribution content has been distributed;

a judgment step of judging, based on the response received in said response-receiving step, whether or not the fulfillment condition has been satisfied; and

a response-execution step, if the fulfillment condition has been satisfied, of executing the response, received in said response-receiving step, to the user terminals to which the distribution content has been distributed and/or the first user terminal.

17. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 1, further including:

a receiving-conditions step of receiving, from setter-user terminals among the user terminals, settings as to receiving conditions that serve as criteria for judging whether or not to receive the distribution content transmitted through said first distribution step or said second distribution step;

a receiving-conditions storing step of storing the receiving conditions correlatively with user identifiers identifying the setter-user terminals;

a reception-satisfying step of judging, prior to executing said first distribution step or said second distribution step, whether or not the receiving conditions per the distributee-candidate terminals or the third user terminals are satisfied; and

a transmission-regulating step of, in accordance with the judgment results from said reception-satisfying step, executing or terminating execution of said first distribution step or said second distribution step.

18. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 1, further including:

a forwarding-conditions step of receiving, from setter-user terminals among the user terminals, settings as to forwarding conditions that serve as criteria for judging whether or not to transmit to some or all of the third user terminals the distribution content transmitted through said second distribution step;

a forwarding-conditions storing step of storing the forwarding conditions correlatively with user identifiers identifying the setter-user terminals;

a forwarding-satisfying step of judging, prior to executing said second distribution step, whether or not the forwarding conditions per the user terminals to which the distribution content has been distributed are satisfied; and

a forwarding-regulating step of, in accordance with the judgment results from said forwarding-satisfying step, executing or terminating execution of said second distribution step.

19. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 1, wherein in said second distribution step a judgment is made as to whether or not the third user terminals include any user terminals to which the distribution content has already been transmitted, and the distribution content is transmitted to some or all of the third user terminals apart from any user terminals to which the distribution content has already been transmitted.

20. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 1, further including:

an incentive-storing step of storing incentive criteria for determining incentives offered to user terminals having received and/or transmitted the distribution content; and

an incentive-offering step of offering, to the user terminals having received and/or transmitted the distribution content, incentives in accordance with the incentive criteria.

21. (ORIGINAL) The information-distribution method set forth by claim 1, wherein:
said storing step includes, when storing the user identifier identifying the designator-user terminal, correlatively with the at least one designee user identifier, grouping the designee user identifiers, if more than one, and storing them group-by-group correlatively with group names;

said distribution-condition-accepting step accepts, as a distribution condition, identicalness or similarity between associations of the group names; and

said distributee-candidate-determining step includes judging whether or not a group name stored correlatively with a first-order user identifier is identical with or similar to a group name designated by the distribution condition, and determining a user terminal stored correlatively with a group name judged to be an identical or similar user terminal to be a candidate terminal to which the distribution content is distributed.

22. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) An information-distribution device connected to user terminals via a network, the information-distribution device comprising:

a designation-accepting means for accepting from any of the user terminals, being a designator, designation of at least any other among the user terminals;

a storing means for storing a buddy list in which at least one designator-user identifier identifying any user terminal that is a designator by said designation-accepting means is correlated with a designee-user identifier identifying the at least one other user terminal designated by said designation-accepting means;

an information-accepting means for accepting, from a first user terminal being a distributor among the user terminals, informational content to be distributed;

a distribution-condition-accepting means for accepting from the distributor-user terminal a distribution condition according to which the distribution content accepted by said information-accepting means is distributed;

a distributee-candidate-determining means for determining one or more distributee-

candidate terminals to which the distribution content will be distributed, the distributee-candidate terminals being at least one selected, in accordance with the distribution condition, from second user terminals among the designee-user terminals stored, by said storing means, correlatively with the designator-user identifier identifying the distributor-user terminal;

a first distribution means for transmitting the distribution content accepted by said information-accepting means to the one or more distributee-candidate terminals;

a second distribution means for transmitting the distribution content, from any user terminal to which the distribution content has been sent, to some or all of one or more third user terminals that are registered in the buddy list of the distributee-candidate terminals; and

a distribution-catenating means for iteratively activating said second distribution means, wherein said distribution-condition-accepting means receive a stop condition for stopping said distribution-catenating means.

23. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) A computer-readable recording medium on which is recorded a information-distribution program utilized by a computer connected to user terminals via a network, the computer-readable recording medium on which is recorded a information-distribution program for executing:

a designation-accepting step of accepting from any of the user terminals, being a designator, designation of at least any other among the user terminals;

a storing step of storing a buddy list in which at least one designator-user identifier identifying any user terminal that is a designator in said designation-accepting step is correlated with a designee-user identifier identifying the at least one other user terminal designated in said designation-accepting step;

an information-accepting step of accepting, from a first user terminal being a distributor among the user terminals, informational content to be distributed;

a distribution-condition-accepting step of accepting from the distributor-user terminal a distribution condition according to which the distribution content accepted in said information-accepting step is distributed;

a distributee-candidate-determining step of determining one or more distributee-candidate terminals to which the distribution content will be distributed, the distributee-candidate terminals being at least one selected, in accordance with the distribution condition, from second user terminals among the designee-user terminals stored, in said storing step, correlatively with the designator-user identifier identifying the distributor-user terminal;

a first distribution step of transmitting the distribution content accepted in said

information-accepting step to the one or more distributee-candidate terminals;

a second distribution step of transmitting the distribution content, from any user terminal to which the distribution content has been sent, to some or all of one or more third user terminals that are registered in the buddy list of the distributee-candidate terminals; and

a distribution-catenating step of repeating said second distribution step, wherein said distribution-condition-accepting step includes receiving a stop condition for stopping said distribution-catenating step.

24. (CURRENTLY AMENDED) A computer product utilized by a computer connected to user terminals via a network, the information-distribution product for making the computer function as:

a designation-accepting means for accepting from any of the user terminals, being a designator, designation of at least any other among the user terminals;

a storing means for storing a buddy list in which at least one designator-user identifier identifying any user terminal that is a designator by said designation-accepting means is correlated with a designee-user identifier identifying the at least one other user terminal designated by said designation-accepting means;

an information-accepting means for accepting, from a first user terminal being a distributor among the user terminals, informational content to be distributed;

a distribution-condition-accepting means for accepting from the distributor-user terminal a distribution condition according to which the distribution content accepted by said information-accepting means is distributed;

a distributee-candidate-determining means for determining one or more distributee-candidate terminals to which the distribution content will be distributed, the distributee-candidate terminals being at least one selected, in accordance with the distribution condition, from second user terminals among the designee-user terminals stored, by said storing means, correlatively with the designator-user identifier identifying the distributor-user terminal;

a first distribution means for transmitting the distribution content accepted by said information-accepting means to the one or more distributee-candidate terminals;

a second distribution means for transmitting the distribution content, from any user terminal to which the distribution content has been sent, to some or all of one or more third user terminals that are registered in the buddy list of the distributee-candidate terminals; and

a distribution-catenating means for iteratively activating said second distribution means, wherein said distribution-condition-accepting means receive a stop condition for stopping said

distribution-catenating means.

25. (WITHDRAWN). An information-distribution method utilized by an information-exchange server able to communicate with a plurality of user terminals via a network, the information distribution method:

accepting, user-by-user in advance, registration of other users whom a given desires will consult information, and storing, as information exchange relationship data, identifier information for the given user, correlatively with the other users of whom it is desired to consult information;

accepting, user-by-user, redistribution of first information pertaining to the given user, and, based on the information-exchange relationship data, reporting or disclosing the first information to users having an information-exchange relationship to the given user; and

accepting, user-by-user, registration of second information containing conditions, picking out, as starting point, users included in the distribution conditions who will be first distributes and, as distributes for the second information, users who, based on the information-exchange relationship data, fit the distribution conditions, and transmitting the second information to the users picked out.

26-28. (CANCELLED).

29. (NEW) An information-distribution method for a system including a computer and user terminals connected via a network, the information-distribution method including:

storing buddy lists in the computer, each buddy list corresponding to a terminal and including at least one other terminal identifier;

providing distribution content to be distributed and a stop distribution condition to the computer by a first user terminal among the user terminals;

determining one or more second terminals to which the distribution content is distributed based on the buddy list corresponding to the first terminal;

first transmitting the distribution content from the computer to the one or more second terminals;

second transmitting the distribution content from the one or more second user terminals to corresponding one or more third user terminals that are registered in the buddy list of the respective one or more second terminals; and

distributing the distribution content one after another to user terminals on the buddy lists of terminals that have received the distribution content until the stop distribution condition is met.

30. (NEW) An information-distribution method for a system including a computer and user terminals connected via a network, the information-distribution method including:

distributing a distribution content provided by a first user terminal to the computer, to one or more second user terminals identified on a buddy list corresponding to the first user terminal; and

distributing the distribution content from user terminals that received the distribution content to corresponding one or more user terminals on buddy lists of the respective user terminals until a stop distribution condition provided by the first terminal is met.